



There are three indispensable items for every Finnish fishing excursion: a fishing pole, a fishing buddy, and, of course, Finlandia. (As you might guess, one of these items may be a little more essential than the other two.)

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# Lake country

Sandwiched between mining to the northeast and farmland to the south, Minnesota's lake country provides recreation for some 3.5 million visitors a year. Lakeside resorts—from rustic to luxurious—dot many of the 500-plus lakes in the Brainerd area, accounting for almost half the state's resort business.



surface. On Gull Lake an annual January fishing tournament attracts more than 5,000 fishermen to an area about a half mile square where 9,000 holes have been drilled. From the air it looks like a page from one of those *Where's Waldo?* books for kids. I can only imagine what it looks like to a fish.

Each February the town of Walker hosts an eelpout festival on Leech Lake. The eelpout is a freshwater cod, and this is about as crazy an outdoor event as you might find anywhere. Some 10,000 people show up for the weekend, though it's pretty clear that many of them have no intention of putting a line in the water.

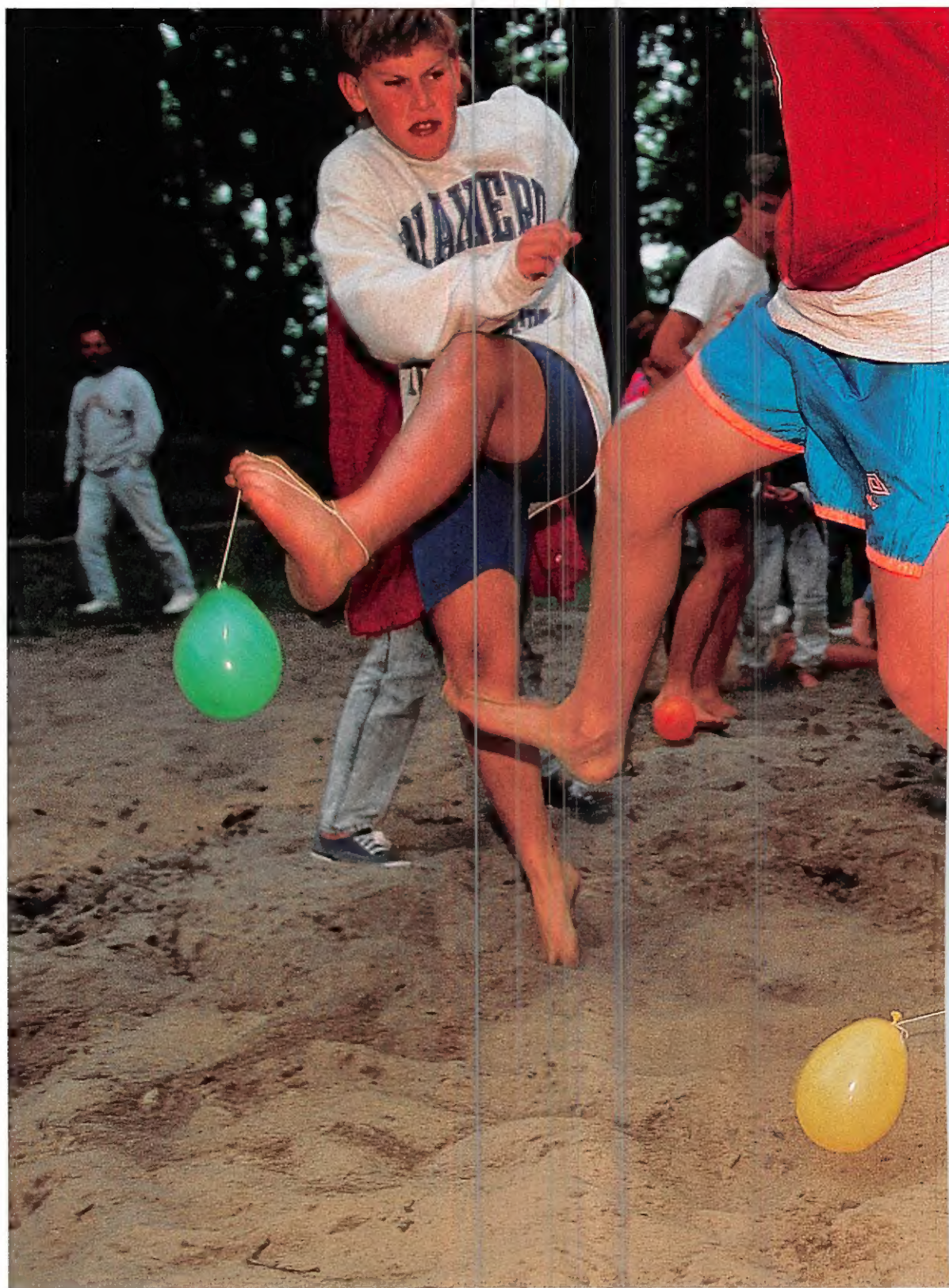
At dawn on the first day I stopped by one fish house (a beat-up mobile home). Four young men from the mainly Finnish town of Menahga were trying to fire up a wood-burning stove to heat the water for their hot tub just outside the front door. They had arrived the night before, and all appeared in need of sleep.

Not satisfied with the stove's output, one of the young anglers decided to prime it a little by pouring some charcoal starter fluid down the stovepipe. He got what a thinking person might expect—a small explosion out the end of the pipe and a hand that was considerably warmer than it had been. He jumped back, shaking his hand in great surprise. "Well, jeez," one of his buddies observed, "you spent a month down in Minneapolis. You'd think you'd know better."

Two of the other men were struggling to erect a banner identifying their spot as The Oasis, but just couldn't get it to hang straight and finally gave up. "That's close enough for the girls we go out with," one of them said.

Later that day I stopped by again. They were all submerged in the hot tub, drinking schnapps and beer while a few snowmobilers bundled up





*Balloon-bursting contest turns the Kee-Nee-Moo-Sha resort on Woman Lake into a stamping ground for kids. While many resorts*